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Beekeeping by the jarful

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By Ashley Trospen
July 9, 2008



Photo By State Journal/Hilly Schiffer

Pat Abell checks to see if there is enough honey to extract from a beehive.



Photo By State Journal/Hilly Schiffer

Pat Abell prepares to extract honey from his beehives. To avoid being stung, Abell fogs the bees to calm them down while he is checking the hives. "I usually only get stung two or three times a year if I'm careful," Abell said.

Got bees?

Pat Abell does - about 600,000 of them.

But Abell, a part-time general counsel to the House majority floor leader in Frankfort, hasn't always been into beekeeping.

It was his son, Ben, a 2006 graduate of the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, who got him into the bee business.

"My son was working with KSU and their bee program," Abell said. "A lady wanted to get rid of a bunch of old hive equipment and he took it and fixed it up."

"I'm glad he did it," Abell added.

For the past two years, Abell has been selling his honey at the Franklin County Farmers Market.

The University of Louisville Law School graduate said it isn't difficult to develop a colony of bees. After getting the equipment, Abell said by taking a couple of frames from an existing hive and having some patience, the colony soon takes off.

"Within a year, it becomes a fully functional hive," Abell said. "My son had to help me the first year."

Each hive is made up of one queen bee, thousands of worker bees (all female) and a couple hundred drones (males), which are booted out of the hive after harvesting the nectar, according to Abell.

Though the hives function year around, Abell said beginning in early June, when the first big nectar flow is finished, is when they really take off.

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From the first nectar flow until September or early October is when the production of honey is in full swing, Abell says.

"The whole hobby is interesting," Abell said. "They all learn their role and carry it out in an organized manner."

Now, four years after beginning this hobby, Abell said he has 10 hives spread in two locations. Half of the hives are located on Kim Hicks' farm west of Bridgeport.

The five hives The State Journal visited are located on the Old Frankfort Poor Farm, three acres owned by Abell's longtime friend, Tom Dorman.

Abell said he locates the hives where they'll not be disturbed. He also said locust trees in the area help to pollinate light honey, which is good.

Dorman joked that by letting Abell keep hives on his land, he gets plenty of free honey. At the Farmers Market, Abell sells his honey by the jar and by the comb. He also said "chunk" honey is popular.

"It's a mixture of the comb and the liquid," Abell said. "It's more like the old-time way people used to eat honey."

The Farmers Market is a nice experience, according to Abell, because of the camaraderie and watching people enjoy the local products.

And surprisingly, Abell said that he doesn't get stung as much as people would think.

"I usually only get stung two or three times a year if I'm careful," Abell said. "But this year I've been terrible. I've already been stung probably 15 times this year."

Abell left a recent House budget meeting during a three-hour intermission to work with the hives. After getting stung a couple of times, he said he had to put on his suit and go back to the Capitol, swelled up like a blimp.

"My co-workers get a kick out of it," Abell said. "When we had the Farmers Market at the Capitol Annex, they gave out fake coupons for my honey during a committee meeting. It was a big joke, but I did get a lot of business."

But Abell said he doesn't do all the work by himself.

Ben, who Abell said does organic gardening at the Frankfort South Farm, still helps his dad out when he can.

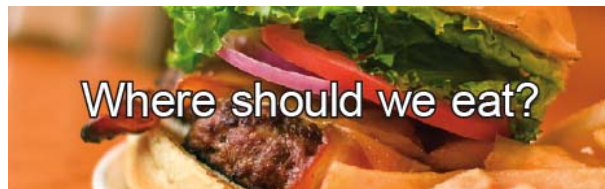
"Ben helps with the extracting," Abell said. "That's the heavy work. And he has four hives out at South Farm to help pollinate the vegetables."

The honey, however, is unlike the other produce at the market, according to Abell, who said he is completely dependent on how much the bees create.

He also said throughout the season, the hives produce about 30 gallons of honey.

"A comb can develop and be ready to harvest in about three or four weeks from beginning to end," Abell said.

"Next year I should have more because I'll have more hives that are mature."



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